THE COACH AS COUNSELOR: "WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE"

by Audra L. Colvert

As a competitor, I thought my team was unique. One of my debate partners was bulimic, two were on antidepressant medications, and everyone hated their home life. I remember one tournament where I watched my debate partner eat dinner and then excuse herself to go to the restroom. I wasn't more than five seconds behind her, yet she was able to vomit before I entered the restroom. The next day, she was so weak, she couldn't concentrate at the tournament. Other teams didn't have these problems--did they? As a coach, I have once again been faced with student's problems ranging from low self-esteem to rape. As I sought advice from colleagues, I learned that I wasn't the only coach being confronted with forensicator's problems. Other teams **did** have many of these same problems.

As authority figures, with whom students spend a lot of time, coaches are being asked to counsel or help them through these psychological difficulties. When students bring these kinds of problems to the coach it creates a unique situation. We are no longer just teaching them how to write a good introduction, now we are being asked advice.... As coaches/counselors we are asked to move beyond our training, and become counselors. But are we qualified?

At the 1992 Speech Communication Conference in Chicago a roundtable discussion entitled "I'm your coach not your therapist" was held. This panel discussed the ramifications of coaching a person's life as well as their individual events. While few solid conclusions were drawn, the panel did set the groundwork for a new area of study. The panel identified a number of questions coaches should address if they are considering helping students with their personal problems. Are we qualified? Should we counsel students? And if so, how far should we go? All of these are valid concerns when considering our expanding roles as coaches.

It is the goal of this article to look at the role of coach as counselor and attempt to define the role more clearly. It will offer guidelines and suggestions concerning where to draw the line between coaching and counseling forensicators, first by defining our roles as coaches; then examining where the line is drawn. It is my premise that we do have a responsibility to our students. And this responsibility includes significant dimensions of counseling.

As coaches, we have a responsibility to help our students through these troubled times when it affects their individual performances and the team.

Lawrence Brammer, a counseling theorist, defines helping as a process of enabling another person to grow in the directions that person chooses, to solve problems, and to face crises. Brammer believes that helping is a function of all concerned human beings and is not limited to professional helpers. He states, "Help consists of providing conditions for helpees to meet their needs. The kind and amount of help given depends on the needs at the time" (Brammer, 1985, p. 8).

William Schutz suggests that the three basic human needs that influence individuals are inclusion, control, and affection (Schutz, 1966). Forensics provides for each of these factors. Choosing which events to enter, examples to use, or selections to perform gives students control over their environment. For others, it is the interactions at team meetings, tournaments, and in vans that makes them feel a part of a group. Also, their interactions with coaches can meet the basic need for affection. Coaches can act as substitute caregivers by being concerned about how a student is feeling. The emotional support team members give to each other and coaches give to their teams creates a healthy environment which allows students' interpersonal needs to be met.

While many students are well adjusted and enjoy the positive interactions and achievements that forensics has to offer, some students require more attention and have greater needs. This creates problems for coaches when individual needs start to interfere with the needs and goals of the team. At this point, coaches must consider what type of action should be taken. Do they remove the student from the team or do they work through the problem?

A winning performance is more than delivering a well-written speech. A student must be convinced that they have the talent necessary to succeed. Forensics is a co-curricular activity that supports the concept of improving students overall communication skills. Helping students grow as individuals is one of our responsibilities as educators.

If Klopf and Lahman (1976) were correct in stating that the paramount goal of the forensics program is the total growth of the student, then I believe it is the responsibility of the coach to work with the whole student. In fact, I contend the well-being of individual competitors is *necessary* for a successful team. When you have one student draining the energy from the coach and other team members, it will impact performances.

Forensics can and should address the whole student. As a result of the Delphi Conference, which was conducted in the mid 1970's to formulate a statement which would define forensics, resolutions were adopted by the American Forensic Association and the Speech Communication Association concerning the goals and roles of forensics as a communication activity. Resolution four states:

> "Forensics should be viewed as humanistic education. Forensics educators should provide a wholesome, exciting, learning environment in which students are encouraged to develop positive attitudes toward the worth of ideas and toward themselves, other persons, and society at large" (McBath, 1975, p. 14).

The discussion that followed this resolution dealt with students' personalities and how they are affected by their experiences in forensics. Conferees acknowledged that: "Inquiry into, and confrontation among ideas and values inevitably must affect their own conscious and unconscious choices in personal values, self-images, and world views. **Hence, the forensics educator should be concerned that the impact of forensics participation upon the student be positive. Such a result is enhanced by regarding forensics as an enterprise in humanistic education"** (McBath, 1975, p. 92). While trying to coach a poetry selection, we ask students to interpret the feelings of the authors. In persuasive speeches we ask

students to appeal to our emotions as well as our sense of logic. Forensics is a communication activity. If we ask the students to explore their emotions and internalize the characters we must be available to work with the results.

Sillars and Zarefsky, believe if "we were to limit our definition of the roles of forensics and forensics directors to pedagogy and scholarship, there would be enough to do within the interdisciplinary goal structure set out there. But there may be other roles" (McBath, 1975, p. 92). Traditionally, a coach was thought of as a teacher of skills, an administrator, and a chaperon. The coach is much more than that. As coaches, we have a great deal of contact with the students. We see them in practice, at team meetings, and during the tournaments. The coach must also be a friend, a parent, a role model, and a counselor. Many teachers do not get to know students very well in a personal sense, but a coach who has built up rapport with students by establishing trust and building relationships in real life contexts is both exposed and accessible to those with troubles (Jones et al, 1982 p. 22).

If we are to be effective coaches, we must be aware of the duties it involves and prepare to be confronted with the problems they bring. Creating a positive climate where students feel welcomed is very important (Destephen, 1982, pp. 5-6). If they do have low self-esteem or poor self-concepts, coaches sometimes need to address the behaviors associated with these feelings in order to be able to focus on individual performances. If a student is unwilling to look you in the eye then as their coach we must address that behavior. Once we start trying to change behaviors we are counseling.

"Behavior therapy is a belief that emotional, learning, and adjustment difficulties can be treated through a variety of prescriptive, mechanical, usually nondynamic techniques and procedures" (Belkin, 1987, p. 92). Even if we use the traditional definition of coach--the teacher of skills--we are using practice and repetition to change performance behaviors. The key to incorporating counseling philosophies is being very conscious of our limitations in each specific situation.

Limitations

There are many reasons why we should limit our involvement in helping students with their problems. The amount of time it consumes, the legal ramifications, and our qualification are three very serious issues that must be addressed.

Time. There never seems to be enough of it. Trying to balance a personal life with coaching and teaching seems almost impossible. Adding a new dimension to the coaching role does not have to take a lot of additional time. Some will argue that if you open your door to students you will end up doing more and more helping and less coaching (Kuper, 1991, p.3). Helping may require some extra time, but by adding esteem building techniques to your coaching style and empowering students with confidence, the long term benefits outweigh any additional time commitment that may be involved in helping students. It may even be as simple as listening to students in the van on the way to a tournament.

Legally, there are many dilemmas coaches face when they become involved in the personal lives of students. If the student is a minor, teachers and coaches are required by law to report cases of abuse or neglect to the appropriate child welfare agencies. As students become adults, the legal line is very complicated. "Establishing trust with students is a paramount goal. Being able to keep information confidential is very important, but, coaches may be asked to testify in an action involving information learned through the counseling situation. Privileged communication is a formal legal confidentiality extended to a few such as priests, lawyers, and physicians, but is not given to teachers and coaches" (Jones et al, 1982 p. 25).

The 1992 SCA panel recommended the creation of a contract between coaches and students to protect coaches from liability. One possibility is to have that contract notarized. Some states such as California have medical release forms for students. Perhaps altering that type of document could protect coaches. Legally, the grounds are very unclear. In certain cases you may be confronted with turning your students over to the proper authorities. Do you handle someone who is stealing from the team or do you report them to the police? It is a tough call. I challenge forensic theorists to investigate the legal ramifications of counseling students more closely.

Lack of experience and qualifications are the greatest limitations which may present coaches from counseling students.

While coaches feel relatively comfortable identifying the problems, they feel much less comfortable counseling or helping students with specific problems. (Colvert, 1993) When looking at psychological problems such as depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, severe anxieties, and dealing with sexuality problems, on average less than thirty percent of the respondents believe they are qualified to help students with these problems. This is not surprising. The frequency of occurrences as well as the lack of training in these areas does not qualify us to be primary counselors in these situations. So what should we do if we have students with these problems?

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

--General--

Dr. Alan Schwitzer, a licensed psychologist and counselor at the James Madison University Counseling Center recommends if you are going to counsel a student you should be aware of what obligations you are going to be taking on and what your motivation is for taking on the role of counselor (Colvert, 1993).

Being able to notice the problem or having someone bring the problem to you is the first step towards treatment. Next, you must decide on what approach is right for the situation. Is it something that you should approach with a student? Is it something that could be solved by working with the team? Is it something that should be referred to outside professionals? Or should you simply stay out of this situation?

Lawrence Brammer suggests using helping skills that will promote understanding of the student and their problems. Brammer clusters these skills into seven areas. Listening, leading, reflecting, summarizing, confronting, interpreting, and informing skills are all important for a helper to learn before they enter a counseling situation (Brammer, 1985 p. 61).

As communication teachers these skills are already taught in a variety of our classes. The key is learning how to successfully implement them into a counseling situation and where to draw the line of involvement.

For some people, coaching is their life. Dr. Schwitzer cautions coaches from becoming too involved in student's personal lives. Examine your motivations for helping students. Are you helping students because they have asked, or is there a risk to them or the team? If so, you are probably engaging in healthy interactions. However, are you helping students because of your interpersonal needs for control, affection, or inclusion? If so, you may be crossing the

line and doing more harm than good. Students must be as self sufficient as possible. Coaches should be available to help students when *the*y need it.

Many of the problems we are asked to deal with are communication based and we are qualified to handle these situations. Mediating conflicts among team members, teaching assertiveness, and preparing students for their first job interviews are topics we are qualified to handle and should handle. I believe we must be willing to practice what they are teaching in the classroom. However, while helping students with relationship problems may be within our grasp, it is the other psychological problems that are outside of our expertise and where great caution is advised.

No one will argue with the fact that forensics attracts an eclectic group of students. However, we also attract their problems, some which may be potentially life-threatening. The following guidelines are offered for dealing with students with three major psychological problems that coaches reported facing during their careers (Colvert, 1993).

- Eating Disorders -

Eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa (starving one's self) and Bulimia (bingeing and purging) are potentially life-threatening problems. Eating disorders usually affect young women who have low-self esteems and a predisposition to intense mood swings. Eating disorders occur in both sexes and usually occur during adolescence and young adulthood. Frequently, eating disorders occur in our female students who we consider to be "ideal". It is this need to be perfect that causes a person to try to change their body to meet the perfect "standard" (University of Illinois, 1999).

The forensic community prides itself on our competitors's being brighter and more motivated than the average student body. This motivation may drive a perfectionist. It also drives a bulimic. The pressure to succeed can often set the person off and cause an attack. So what can you do to help the student before it affects the team?

Meal times at tournaments are usually a time for social bonding. If you know that you have a student with an eating disorder, or even if you don't, I offer a suggestion concerning food. Forensics tournaments are not the most healthy settings. Donuts and coffee at 8:00 a.m. and lunch if there is time, makes eating regularly very difficult. Everyone is concerned about their health. If you can help your team eat better--do so. Try to avoid restaurants that specialize in high fat foods. Also, if you can pack healthy lunches or snack foods instead of skipping meals or eating fast food all weekend, it will help everyone on your team increase the energy they have while competing. Your team will appreciate the break from fast food and the student with the disorder will feel less threatened by their environment.

One coach reported that her student was recovering from bulimia. When the student joined the team, she was very open with the coach about her disorder. The student asked if they could avoid eating pizza. It seems that the student was especially vulnerable to bingeing on this food. It was easy enough to eliminate pizza from the menu when that student was traveling. This change let the student concentrate on competition rather than eating. You can't let the student control the teams actions, but you can adjust your habits if it's beneficial to everyone.

- Depression -

Dr. Schwitzer, mentioned that depression is a life threatening illness that cannot be ignored. He states: "In your roles [as coaches] you need to take on the responsibility of approaching students. But first, you must be educated on the signs of depression and realize they may even be present when the person gets help".

There must be a distinction made between a student in a blue mood and student with a depressive illness. A student with a depressive illness may have any or all of the following: prolonged feelings of sadness and irritability, loss of interest or pleasure in activities (such as forensics), changes in weight or appetite, changes in sleeping pattern, feeling guilty, hopeless, or worthless, inability to concentrate, remember things, or make decisions, extreme fatigue or loss of energy, restlessness or decreased activity; and finally thoughts of death or suicide (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III, 1994). Students who feel blue today can feel good tomorrow. A person with a depressive illness cannot.

The American Psychiatric Association recognizes several different types of depression. The first type of depression is a normal depressed mood and grief due to loss of a loved one. This type of depression is caused by a triggering life event and recovery is expected. The second type of depression is an adjustment disorder with a depressed mood. Coping with life changes such as a move to a new city or a new school may send students into a gloomy or angry period. It is the duration of this period that can become troublesome and may cause concern. It may lead to a mild depression (dysthymia) which includes chronic depressed moods, poor self-esteem, and lower daily functioning. This type of depression does not disable individuals, but keeps them from feeling good.

The "seriously depressed" student experiences profound despair and hopelessness. Major depression may strike without a triggering loss, it lasts for at least two weeks and is characterized by sleep problems, appetite problems, lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, and possible suicidal thoughts. Other forms of depression include bipolar disorder (cycles of elevation and depression), Seasonal Affective Disorder (winter blues), or even post-partum depression. (Depression.com, 1999).

A depressed student can seriously affect the morale of the team. Dr. Schwitzer emphasized that a student should not be allowed to manipulate the team. If behaviors become disruptive, the coach must be consistent with team policies and enforce appropriate consequences.

Suicide is a great possibility in people who are lonely and depressed. Don't let the warning signs go unnoticed. Many persons state their intent while others may hint at their plans. General statements describing feelings of hopelessness, despair, self-doubt, and, extreme loneliness may suggest suicidal thoughts (National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association, 1999). Tragically, the forensics community has been made aware of the effects of suicides on surviving coaches and team members. As one coach stated: "It causes me to be more proactive and aggressive in getting students help." If you suspect a student is severely depressed and experiencing suicidal tendencies, refer the student to the appropriate resources. If you have to, go with them to seek professional counseling. The risk of not getting involved in this type of problem is too great.

--Substance Abuse--

Most [schools] have a policy concerning alcohol consumption on sponsored activities. Once again, students must be responsible for their actions. Consumption of alcohol becomes the team's problem when it starts to interfere with a person's emotional or physical well-being. When drinking starts interfering with a student's per-

formance in rounds the next morning, something needs to be done. Alcohol abuse can result from attempts to cope with stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety, pressure and also from social environments that encourage heavy drinking (Halek, 1991, p. 37). Heavy drinking is often a sign that there is a more severe problem that needs to be examined. There is something we can do as coaches.

What you do and how you behave is extremely important. Students watch their coach carefully. When [students] like and respect their coach, they imitate their behavior; they see and accept many attitudes they detect in the coach (Coaching Theory Level Two. 1981 p. 1-6). I am not saying that if you set a good example it will prevent an alcoholic from drinking. If a student physically needs the drink and the student's drinking is harming the performance of the individual or the team enforcing an alcohol policy is your only option. As an individual, you can only help an alcoholic, if they want it. Your first responsibility is to the team.

If you suspect students are using drugs, once again you have a decision to make. Drug use and abuse are beyond the abilities of coaches. Being a good listener and supporter of the student should be a main objective after a student has received help for a substance abuse problem.

Many students are already in recovery programs and simply need someone to support them and help them rebuild their self-esteem. Forensics can offer students an outlet for building self-confidence. Providing students with an environment that promotes growth and understanding can be a healthy alternative to a past lifestyle.

Conclusions

The forensics coaching community does have a responsibility to help students grow both mentally and emotionally. This responsibility requires commitment. Since the forensics community does not require coaches to be certified or have any formal training in counseling, educators should strive to reach this commitment by educating themselves on crisis counseling and basic counseling techniques. To prepare for problem situations it is recommended that in-services or panels at major communication conferences attack specific guidelines for dealing with students needs. Also, we must delve into researching the interpersonal communication patterns in the forensics arena. Ultimately, students must direct their own course of events in which they participate and their lives outside of forensics. If we can instill self-confidence and self-esteem in our students by helping them through troubled times by: listening, advising, referring, and helping when we feel qualified then we will be accomplishing our goal as humanistic educators which is aiming for the total well-being of students and fostering social and mental growth. Ultimately, the coach who cares about the team and its competitive success will also care about the players [forensicators] and will listen, help, advise, and stand by the players [forensicators] as a true friend and counselor (Jones et al 1982 p. 24).

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